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VIKTOR KRIVULIN

(1944–2001)

In Russian folklore there are local spirits called *domovye*, imagined as bearded little men, crafty but usually benevolent, who look after the home. The poet Viktor Krivulin, who died of lung cancer at the age of 56 on Saturday 17 March, was the *domovoi* of the underground or alternative culture of Leningrad/St Petersburg from the late 1960s to its end in the late 1980s.* And it was fitting that he should have found a new role as guardian of freedom in the post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s, as vice-president of the St Petersburg Pen Club, as a journalist and as a campaigner for democracy.

During the 1970s and early 1980s he was not only a prolific poet but was also a hub of *samizdat* production. He and his first wife, the philosopher Tania Goricheva, organized unofficial seminars and edited

* This is an expanded version of an obituary originally published in *The Independent*.

the journal *37*, named after the number of their communal apartment. As one of the Leningrad feminists, Tania Goricheva was forcibly extradited at the time of the Russian Olympics. Krivulin too, as a potential troublemaker, was advised by the KGB to leave the country, but declined the offer. In 1981 a volume of his poetry was published abroad in Paris and at home he continued his involvement with *samizdat* journals—*Obvodnyi Kanal* and *Chasy*, the journal connected with the Leningrad alternative culture club 'Klub-81' to which he also belonged. Like many other members of the Leningrad second culture, his belated first official Soviet publication was in the pages of the club's anthology, *Krug*, in 1985. His room in a communal apartment on the Petrogradskaia Storona was itself a cultural club, not only for Leningrad but also for visiting Moscow artists and writers.

After the changes, in his new incarnation as co-chairman of the St. Petersburg branch of the Democratic Russia party, he worked with and for the reformer Galina Starovoitova. She was murdered in November 1998 before she could present a report to the Duma on corruption among government officials. Krivulin held vigil for her: representing her party, he spoke against the emerging extremist nationalists and campaigned courageously against them in the dirty local elections of December 1998 when antisemites were loudly threatening, and using, violence against the opposition.

In his work and in his life he defended individual conscience and moral standards, first in a society that favoured mediocrity and conformity, then in one that had switched to money and consumerism. At Leningrad University in the 1960s he deliberately sabotaged any possibility of an academic career by publicly resigning from the Komsomol, thus committing himself to poetry and life on the fringe. But in fact the real cultural life of the time was there in the fringe, in *kommunalki*, the shabby bed-sitting rooms of communal apartments where 'unofficial' writers and artists met. These unpromising premises were the cauldron of the counter-culture, fired by hectic socializing. For most of his life Krivulin inhabited a succession of such rooms, always at the centre of feverish activity, plotting and, of course, drinking. When did he, or any of them, have time to write? The answer is 'work'. Because of mandatory full employment, the Soviet economy was riddled with undemanding semi-jobs, often virtual sinecures. One of the ironies of the time was how the Soviet State funded subversive art:

'back in the institution's womb
where once I was employed and used to hide
poetry under business documents'
(*poems on maps*)

As a child Krivulin suffered a crippling illness that left him only able to walk with extreme difficulty using two walking sticks. The experience may have given him the toughness to flourish in a hostile environment. A thick skin was useful as much against the inevitable threats and vituperation from the authorities as to endure the backbiting of fellow artists. But, over and beyond that, Krivulin managed to survive with grace, humour and generosity. When I visited the Soviet Union I would bring such gifts as unobtainable goods or books, but when I visited him I would leave with more gifts than I had brought.

Krivulin's work still remains largely unknown in the West. A few translations from his *poems on maps* and *Gallery* have appeared in various British and American journals and in the Penguin anthology *Child of Europe*, some more are due to appear in a forthcoming Anvil anthology. Ten years ago, on his one visit to England, he gave a single poetry reading to a fascinated but bemused audience in a room above a Soho pub. For the English reader his work remains, for the time being, in a cultural border zone—*Predgraniche* (the title of a 1994 collection). Borders and maps, our projections and images of the world, were leitmotifs of his poetry. Where is the world we imagine? where is the real Russia? how does it relate to the West? or to its own past? These questions revolved without resolution. Each short poem emerges and fades unobtrusively into the larger background of an undefined total work. His specific tone persists throughout, whether querying or laying down the law, an individual voice with its own space, alongside those of Akhmatova and Brodskii, within the ramshackle *kommunalka* of twentieth-century Petersburg literature.

Freud Museum, London *Michael Molnar*